

IMPLEMENTATION PRINCIPLES – TURNING INTENTIONS INTO OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

Companies sometimes fail to take effective action even when they know what they should do. Recent research shows that this surprising situation is more common than one would expect. How can the track record of companies in achieving the outcomes targeted by manufacturing strategy be improved? This article proposes a set of eight principles to improve the chances of taking effective action to turn intentions into outcomes. Rooted in the literature, the principles have also surfaced in case based research and commented on in the context of international consulting activities.

OPSOMMING

Dit gebeur partykeer dat maatskappye nie doelgerig optree nie, ook al weet hulle wat hulle moet doen. Onlangse navorsing dui aan dat so 'n verrassende situasie meer algemeen is as wat mens sou verwag. Hoe kan die baanrekord van maatskappye verbeter word om doelwitte wat in bedryfsstrategie gestel word werklik te beryk? Hierdie artikel stel 'n reeks van agt beginsels voor om die kans dat effektiewe aksie geneem word om wense in uitslae te omskep, te verbeter. Die beginsels, gewortel in die literatuur, het ook in gevallestudie-gebaseerde navorsing ter sprake gekom en word hier bespreek in die konteks van internasionale raadgewende werk.

1. INTRODUCTION

‘I have always found it easier to buy books on management than to read them,’ says a manager friend of ours. Somehow that seems to sum up the interesting phenomenon known as the ‘knowing-doing gap.’ [1] In our experience it is not just individuals, but organisations too, that constantly renew the road to hell with intentions lackadaisically, or never, implemented.

There is a growing awareness that implementation is a core competence of companies capable of sustained success. [2] Recent books describe and promote implementation in general. [3, 4] This article sets out principles for an improving track record in the effective implementation of *manufacturing* strategy.

2. THE IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH PROJECT

We base our approach on a multi-year collaborative research project of the Manufacturing Roundtable (MRT). The MRT is an industry-academia consortium conducting research into issues identified by industry. We used a case-based methodology to attempt to understand examples of effective implementation in manufacturing settings. We deliberately sought successes. One of the members of the MRT, Competitive Capabilities International, took a primary role in assessing the implementation principles in a range of client organisations throughout the world.

3. WHAT IS EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION?

The aim of a manufacturing strategy is to advance organisational competitiveness through improving one or more of the following:

- cost
- quality
- flexibility
- delivery

We refer to these dimensions as the ‘4 Horsemen’ or simply, ‘4H.’

Effective implementation is about achieving significant movement towards targeted outcomes for one or more of the 4H: ‘I have reduced late deliveries from 15% to 5%’ rather than just pursuing the means - ‘I am implementing Six Sigma.’

Putting this into symbols, effective implementation, I_e , may be expressed as

$$I_e = \{O_a \rightarrow O_d\}_{4H}, \text{ or } \{\Delta O_{a \rightarrow d}\} \geq \{\Delta O_{a \rightarrow d}\}_{\min}$$

where $\{\Delta O_{a \rightarrow d}\}_{\min}$ represents the minimum acceptable movement from the actual current performance (O_a) towards the desired outcome (O_d).

The manufacturing strategy process, guided by the question ‘How do we win orders?’ should identify for product families and market segments, the 4H dimensions that need improvement;

this sets up the targets for the implementation process. [5] At the heart of effective manufacturing strategy implementation is knowing what you want to do, i.e. knowing what $\{O_a \rightarrow O_d\}_{4H}$ gap you want to close.

4. PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

In our implementation research project we picture a chief executive asking, ‘How can we improve our track record for the effective implementation of manufacturing strategy?’ We have developed eight principles in response to this question:

1. Never stop asking the question.
2. Prepare a plan of action.
3. Surface the ‘force for effective implementation’ as a function of
 - a) the *clarity* regarding *what* you want to achieve, in outcome terms
 - b) the *confidence* in knowing *how* to achieve this new outcome
 - c) the *conviction* as to *why* it is necessary to achieve this new outcome.
4. Use the ‘force for effective implementation’ to elicit appropriate behaviour from stakeholders who
 - a) have the power to sabotage the intervention, or
 - b) whose supportive behaviour is highly likely to determine the degree to which the outcome is achieved and sustainedFurthermore, use this ‘force’ to judge the ‘point of no return’ or ‘point of commitment’ (POC) for the particular initiative.
5. Have ‘dual organisation’ capability.
6. Take the ‘first small steps.’
7. Lead like a relentless but reflective bulldozer driver.
8. Create a fault-tolerant environment for the above 7 points to flourish.

We will look at each of these principles a little more closely before summarising our research findings.

4.1 Never stop asking the question

A ‘discovery process’ as opposed to an ‘idea-imposition process’ has been shown to yield better decisions. [6] Implementation is essentially about testing an ‘if-then’ proposition. You can never know in advance that your plan is foolproof. You learn by putting it to the test in the understanding that you will both ‘get things achieved by doing’ and ‘learn by doing.’ This is our core contention: a discovery process seeking ‘operationally validated theories’ drives success. [7]

4.2 Prepare a plan of action.

This constitutes the ‘if-then’ proposition, constructed like this: ‘if this set of actions is executed then that desired outcome will be achieved.’ Firstly, it requires a clear statement as to *what* is to be achieved, e.g. ‘We aim to improve the first pass yield on line 3 from 93% (3σ) to 99.4% (4σ).’ Secondly, it requires clarity as to *how* it is to be achieved, including the sequence and timing of actions. [4] In symbolic terms, the plan of action is expressed as:

If ΣA_i then $\{O_a \rightarrow O_d\}_{4H}$

where A_i represents the i^{th} action, and ΣA_i the complete set of actions deemed necessary to achieve the desired outcome.

Setting up the plan is not an essentially technical activity; it is a leadership challenge. The plan of action needs to arise from a robust debate ‘to surface the realities of the company’ and, by inference, the action plans designed to achieve targeted outcomes. [4]

4.3 Surface the ‘force for effective implementation’

This is the ‘what/why/how’ of implementation. We have constructed it as an equation to give a measure of the ‘motivational force’ impelling effective implementation:

Let W = the degree of *clarity* about *what* you want to achieve, in outcome terms, on a scale of 0 to 1
 H = the degree of *confidence* in knowing *how* to go about achieving the outcome, on a scale of 0 to 1
 Y = the degree of *conviction* about *why* you want to achieve this outcome, on a scale of -1 to 1, where -1 indicates strong negative sentiments about achieving the outcome
 F = the motivational force for effective implementation, on a scale of -1 to 1 where -1 equates with absolute negative motivation and +1 with absolute positive motivation to achieve the target outcome,
 then $F = W \times H \times Y$, or simply, $F = WHY$.

For example, in a recent meeting a group of senior managers found they were only 60% clear on what they wanted to achieve, 30% convinced of the need to achieve it, and 80% confident in the plan to do it (figures were informally proposed). The overall score of $0.6 \times 0.3 \times 0.8 = 0.144$, or 14.4% showed them that they were not anywhere near ready to commit to the proposal; the ‘force for effective implementation’ was simply not yet strong enough.

The ‘force’ is a (notional) metric for assessing how motivated the decision-making group is with respect to each of the initiatives before them. Its primary purpose is to surface a realistic sense of, and then commitment to, a ‘point of no return’ or ‘point of commitment’ (POC); it counteracts the knowing-yet-not-doing tendency noted above.

4.4 Use the ‘force for effective implementation’ to elicit appropriate behaviour from stakeholders

There are two kinds of stakeholders, viz. those

- a) who have the power to sabotage the intervention (negative power can be individual);
- b) whose supportive behaviour is highly likely to determine the degree to which the outcome is achieved and sustained (positive power is collective).

The ‘force’ has to be cascaded: it is about both the ‘buy-in’ process and about the overall leadership-followership of the endeavour.

4.5 Have ‘dual organisation’ capability

If the organisation is running very lean, with every person fully engaged in meeting daily production requirements, there is no mental space or time to implement.

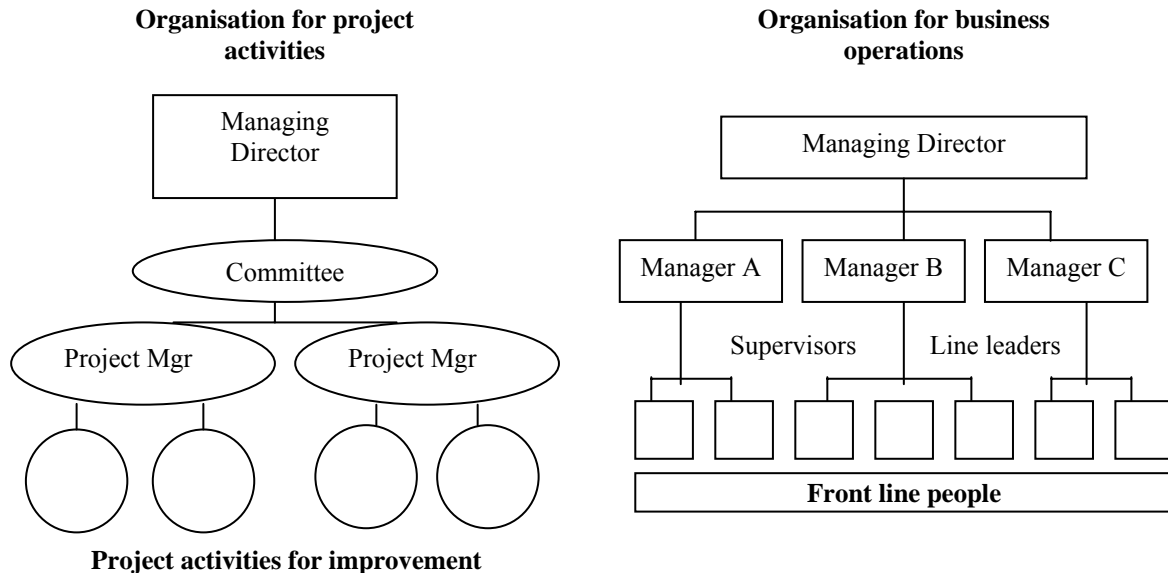


Figure 1: A conceptual model of the dual organisation [8]

A dual organisation, as illustrated in Figure 1, has two parts, one designed to meet daily targets, the other to manage improvement processes. The chief executive heads both structures and people move for shorter or longer periods between the two structures. In so doing, the ability to initiate and cooperate in improvement processes is not only clearly managed but also becomes widely understood and disseminated. Furthermore, this is done without focus being lost on day-to-day control and achievement of forecasts and plans, which is the task of the ‘organisation for business operations.’

4.6 Take the ‘first small steps’

Put the hypothesis to the test – ‘Just do it’ - by identifying the ‘first small steps’ and starting with them. Taking those first small steps and achieving the first (even minor) targets has enormous psychological and practical value; personal and collective optimism and resilience are enhanced as practical progress is made. [9, 10] In our experience, the use of a ‘pilot’ to emphasise the experimental and learning nature of the intervention, and reduce the cost on the learning curve, is almost always appropriate when implementing in an organisation employing more than about 30 people.

Furthermore, action gets things done *and* it is the most effective form of learning. [3] Effective implementation is always a process, and learning to improve it is, even more so, a process. And what is learnt from doing is more likely to be applied than what is learnt ‘from reading, listening, or even thinking.’ [3]

4.7 Lead like a relentless but reflective bulldozer driver.

A study has shown that effective managers are both more patient and more demanding than their less effective colleagues. [11] In our research we have noted the absolute centrality of leadership to implementation success, and this ‘demanding-patience’ has appeared to be one of the characteristics of that successful leadership. The demanding side will not compromise on the targeted outcomes. The patient side looks for progress and drives the discovery process implicit in the CEO’s question.

Implementation is the core test of leadership: ‘Leadership without the discipline of execution is incomplete and ineffective. Without the ability to execute, all other attributes of leadership become hollow.’ [4]

4.8 Create a fault-tolerant environment for the above 7 points to flourish

In all organisations every leader has a boss. We are all accountable. If we want the person working for us to implement well, we need to cut them some slack about getting everything right all the time. [3] When a requirement becomes incumbent on each ‘boss,’ it becomes a requirement of the corporate culture.

5. A QUICK SCORECARD

What does the case based research and the work in the ‘consulting laboratory’ reveal?
Table 1 reports briefly.

#	Factor	Findings
1	Never stop asking the question	Virtually no examples of an ‘enquiring approach’ to implementation encountered. However, many of the companies studied in the case based research were clearly intrigued that there might be a ‘technology of implementation.’
2	Prepare a plan of action or project plan	Consultants provide the set of actions designed to achieve the target outcomes. When consultants not used, project plans vague; ‘contingency’ approach followed. In two cases, each with an excellent track record of implementing practical change, project management approach explicit and prominent.
3	Surface the ‘force for effective implementation’	Using the tools of manufacturing strategy, consultants build the case for action for their clients. Among the leaders who were really effective in implementing, there was a high awareness at least about why action was necessary.
4	Elicit appropriate behaviour from stakeholders	Explicit part of approach by consultants; formally approached. Their experience supports view: this is a vital principle. Where consultants not involved, the explicit use of this approach is less clear. A few companies went to great lengths to initiate and maintain wide support for the implementation initiative. In majority of cases, however, this was not a formal, organisation-wide part of the implementation approach.

5	Have ‘dual organisation’ capability	Consultants themselves provide additional capacity devoted to improvement. In all the cases of even moderately successful implementation, people were partly or fully released from day-to-day responsibilities to work on the implementation initiative.
6	Take the ‘first small steps’	By the nature of their selection, all the case studies showed that actual implementation actions were taken. The consultants have experienced some potential clients who, after years of talk and advice (free!), have still failed to take any effective actions. In contrast they have ‘model’ clients who have had excellent results by strict adherence to the action steps advised. ‘Blitz’ projects are increasingly used by the consultants to create action, and quick results; this is proving effective in moving clients to more sustained improvement activities.
7	Lead like a relentless but reflective bulldozer driver	In all cases, both in consulting and in the research, this style of leadership has been associated with implementation success. Failures have been associated with divided or unassertive leadership.
8	Create a fault-tolerant environment for the above 7 points to flourish	Companies did not talk about this. Consultants are of course ‘not allowed to’ make mistakes. But the individual managers identified under 7 above had the courage to overcome the fault-intolerance of their organisations.

Table 1: Preliminary findings

6. CONCLUSIONS

‘How can we improve our track record in implementing manufacturing strategy?’ Research and practice have led us to develop the eight principles. In general our field research shows a low awareness of many of them. But there is a clear and explicit conformance to some by organizations with a good implementation record. We believe the eight principles can both guide implementation practice and be the basis for more, rigorous research to hone the response to the CEO’s question.

We refer again to the growing evidence that too many organizations fail to take effective action even when they know what to do. [3] Table 2 illustrates the outcome possibilities facing an organisation which has a clearly identified need for change. It shows how failing to do what we know we should is not just neutral; it has negative consequences. Our intention in this project is to push forward in understanding how to help managers take effective action. Our increasingly competitive environment demands that we improve our track record in implementing manufacturing strategy.

		Effective action taken?	
		No	Yes
Do we know what to do to achieve our intentions?	Yes	Achieve frustration?	Achieve desired outcome
	No	Stuck?	Lucky!

Table 2: The knowing-doing matrix

7. REFERENCES

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